The Digital Clinical Charts Project

One of the biggest challenges in art conservation is to know when an art work is in jeopardy or needs to be restored. To do so, however, requires a thorough knowledge of where the artwork has been and its current condition. In other words, museums need the type of information that doctors typically rely upon to diagnose a sick patient. A physician would not prescribe medication or surgery without first taking the patient’s clinical history and ordering the appropriate x-rays, CAT scans and so on. Those tests are carried out at routine intervals and become part of the patient’s constantly-updated clinical chart—on which all future medical decisions will be made.

The ‘digital clinical chart’ would do the same for works of art, and would include a wide variety of multispectral scans, archival information and analytical reports to help museums and collectors maintain up-to-date digital records of the work’s condition over time. Ultimately, charts could become de rigueur for all the works in museum and private collections. This is a new approach to conservation, and the chart would be consulted whenever there is a concern about a work’s ‘health’—e.g., when the work is scheduled for shipping, when lighting or humidity of an environment is affecting the artwork’s condition, or when damage is suspected.

To demonstrate the value of these charts to museums and private collectors worldwide, CISA3 has already begun a pilot project in collaboration with the San Diego Museum of Art on selected major works from its permanent collection. “The results will guide us in deciding how to protect and preserve these works from future damage,” says the museum’s executive director, Derrick Cartwright. “At the same time, the San Diego Museum of Art hopes to use the process as a learning tool for audiences—a tool that will be integrated into the museum experience in order to give visitors a much deeper understanding of how art is created.”

With appropriate funding, the Digital Clinical Chart project will be expanded to include more works from the San Diego museum’s collection and from other institutions around the world. “The collaboration with the San Diego Museum of Art gives the center a chance to become open to the community,” says CISA3 director Maurizio Seracini. “I believe that this center will become instrumental in cultural initiatives emerging in San Diego as a result of this work, and because of our links to projects abroad.”

CISA3 will chart the health of SD Museum of Art works by Giorgione (above) and Signorelli (right).

Above: Diagram of the contents of a clinical chart for a work of art.

Right: CISA3 team sets up infrared imaging equipment at San Diego Museum of Art.

http://cisa3.calit2.net